

Letter From An Unknown Woman

By

Stefan Zweig

WHEN R., *the famous novelist*, returned to Vienna early in the morning, after a refreshing three-day excursion into the mountains, and bought a newspaper at the railway station, he was reminded as soon as his eye fell on the date that this was his birthday. His forty-first birthday, as he quickly reflected, an observation that neither pleased nor displeased him. He swiftly leafed through the crisp pages of the paper, and hailed a taxi to take him home to his apartment. His manservant told him that while he was away there had been two visitors as well as several telephone calls, and brought him the accumulated post on a tray. R. looked casually through it, opening a couple of envelopes because the names of their senders interested him; for the moment he set aside one letter, apparently of some length and addressed to him in writing that he did not recognize. Meanwhile the servant had brought him tea; he leant back in an armchair at his ease, skimmed the newspaper again, leafed through several other items of printed matter, then lit himself a cigar, and only now picked up the letter that he had put to one side.

It consisted of about two dozen sheets, more of a manuscript than a letter and written hastily in an agitated, feminine hand that he did not know. He instinctively checked the envelope again in case he had missed an explanatory enclosure. But the envelope was empty, and like the letter itself bore no address or signature identifying the sender. Strange, he thought, and picked up the letter once more. It began, "To you, who never knew me," which was both a salutation and a challenge. He stopped for a moment in surprise: was this letter really addressed to him or to some imaginary person? Suddenly his curiosity was aroused. And he began to read:

My child died yesterday — for three days and three nights I wrestled with death for that tender little life, I sat for forty hours at his bedside while the influenza racked his poor, hot body with fever. I put cool compresses on his forehead, I held his restless little hands day and night. On the third evening I collapsed. My eyes would not stay open any longer; I was unaware of it when they closed. I slept, sitting on my hard chair, for three or four hours, and in that time death took him. Now the poor sweet boy lies there in his narrow child's bed, just as he died; only his eyes have been closed, his clever, dark eyes, and his hands are folded over his white shirt, while four candles burn at the four corners of his bed. I dare not look, I dare not stir from my chair, for when the candles flicker shadows flit over his face and his closed mouth, and then it seems as if his features were moving, so that I might think he was not dead after all, and will wake up and say something loving and childish to me in his clear voice. But I know that he is dead, I will arm myself against hope and further disappointment, I will not look at him again. I know it is true, I know my child died yesterday — so now all I have in the world is you, you who know nothing about me, you who are now amusing yourself without a care in the world, dallying with things and with people. I have only you, who never knew me, and whom I have always loved.

I have taken the fifth candle over to the table where I am writing to you now. For I cannot be alone with my dead child without weeping my heart out, and to whom am I to speak in this terrible hour if not to you, who were and are everything to me? Perhaps I shall not be able to speak to you entirely clearly, perhaps you will not understand me — my mind is dulled, my temples throb and hammer, my limbs hurt so much. I think I am feverish myself, perhaps I too have the influenza that is spreading fast in this part of town, and I would be glad of it, because then I could go with my child without having to do myself any violence. Sometimes everything turns dark before my eyes; perhaps I shall not even be able to finish writing this letter — but I am summoning up all my strength to speak to you once, just this one time, my beloved who never knew me.

I speak only to you; for the first time I will tell you everything, the whole story of my life, a life that has always been yours although you never knew it. But you shall know my secret only once I am dead, when you no longer have to answer me, when whatever is now sending hot and cold shudders through me really is the end. If I have to live on, I shall tear this letter up and go on preserving my silence as I have always preserved it. However, if you are holding it in your hands, you will know that in these pages a dead woman is telling you the story of her life, a life that was yours from her first to her last waking hour. Do not be afraid of my words; a dead woman wants nothing any more, neither love nor pity nor comfort. I want only one thing from you: I want you to believe everything that my pain tells you here, seeking refuge with you. Believe it all, that is the only thing I ask you: no one lies in the hour of an only child's death.

I will tell you the whole story of my life, and it is a life that truly began only on the day I met you. Before that, there was nothing but murky confusion into which my memory never dipped again, some kind of cellar full of dusty, cobwebbed, sombre objects and people. My heart knows nothing about them now. When you arrived I was thirteen years old, living in the apartment building where you live now, the same building in which you are holding my letter, my last living breath, in your hands. I lived in the same corridor, right opposite the door of your apartment. I am sure you will not remember us any more, an accountant's impoverished widow (my mother always wore mourning) and her thin teenage daughter; we had quietly become imbued, so to speak, with our life of needy respectability. Perhaps you never even heard our name, because we had no nameplate on the front door of our apartment, and no one came to visit us or asked after us. And it is all so long ago, fifteen or sixteen years; no, I am sure you don't remember anything about it, my beloved, but I — oh, I recollect every detail with passion. As if it were today, I remember the very day, no, the very hour when I first heard your voice and set eyes on you for the first time, and how could I not? It was only then that the world began for me. Allow me, beloved, to tell you the whole story from the beginning. I beg you, do not tire of listening to me for a quarter of an hour, when I have never tired of loving you all my life.

Before you moved into our building a family of ugly, mean-minded, quarrelsome people lived behind the door of your apartment. Poor as they were, what they hated most was the poverty next door, ours, because we wanted nothing to do with their down-at-heel, vulgar, uncouth manners. The man was a drunk and beat his wife; we were often woken in the night by the noise of chairs falling over and plates breaking; and once the wife, bruised and bleeding, her hair all tangled, ran out onto the stairs with the drunk shouting abuse after her until the neighbours came out of their own doors and threatened him with the police. My mother avoided any contact with that couple from the first, and forbade me to speak to their children, who seized every opportunity of avenging themselves on me. When they met me in the street they called me dirty names, and once threw such hard snowballs at me that I was left with blood running from my forehead. By some common instinct, the whole building hated that family, and when something suddenly happened to them — I think the husband was jailed for theft — and they had to move out, bag and baggage, we all breathed a sigh of relief. A few days later the "To Let" notice was up at the entrance of the building, and then it was taken down; the caretaker let it be known — and word quickly went around — that a single, quiet gentleman, a writer, had taken the apartment. That was when I first heard your name.

In a few days' time painters and decorators, wallpaper-hangers and cleaners came to remove all trace of the apartment's previous grubby owners; there was much knocking and hammering, scraping and scrubbing, but my mother was glad of it. At last, she said, there would be an end to the sloppy housekeeping in that apartment. I still had not come face to face with you by the time you moved in; all this work was supervised by your manservant, that small, serious, grey-haired gentleman's gentleman, who directed operations in his quiet, objective, superior way. He impressed us all very much, first because a gentleman's gentleman was something entirely new in our suburban apartment building, and then because he was so extremely civil to everyone, but without placing himself on a par with the other servants and engaging them in conversation as one of themselves. From the very first day he addressed my mother with the respect due to a lady, and he was always gravely friendly even to me, little brat that I was. When he mentioned your name he did so with a kind of special esteem — anyone could tell at once that he thought far more of you than a servant usually does of his master. And I liked him so much for that, good old Johann, although I envied him for always being with you to serve you.

I am telling you all this, beloved, all these small and rather ridiculous things, so that you will understand how you could have such power, from the first, over the shy, diffident child I was at the time. Even before you yourself came into my life, there was an aura around you redolent of riches, of something out of the ordinary, of mystery — all of us in that little suburban apartment building were waiting impatiently for you to move in (those who live narrow lives are always curious about any novelty on their doorsteps). And how strongly I, above all, felt that curiosity to see you when I came home from school one afternoon and saw the removals van standing outside the building. The men had already taken in most of the furniture, the heavy pieces, and now they were carrying up a few smaller items; I stayed standing by the doorway so that I could

marvel at everything, because all your possessions were so interestingly different from anything I had ever seen before. There were Indian idols, Italian sculptures, large pictures in very bright colours, and then, finally, came the books, so many of them, and more beautiful than I would ever have thought possible. They were stacked up by the front door of the apartment, where the manservant took charge of them, carefully knocking the dust off every single volume with a stick and a feather duster. I prowled curiously around the ever-growing pile, and the manservant did not tell me to go away, but he didn't encourage me either, so I dared not touch one, although I would have loved to feel the soft leather of many of their bindings. I only glanced shyly and surreptitiously at the titles; there were French and English books among them, and many in languages that I didn't know. I think I could have stood there for hours looking at them all, but then my mother called me in.

After that, I couldn't stop thinking of you all evening, and still I didn't know you. I myself owned only a dozen cheap books with shabby board covers, but I loved them more than anything and read them again and again. And now I couldn't help wondering what the man who owned and had read all these wonderful books must be like, a man who knew so many languages, who was so rich and at the same time so learned. There was a kind of supernatural awe in my mind when I thought of all those books. I tried to picture you: you were an old man with glasses and a long white beard, rather like our geography teacher, only much kinder, better-looking and better-tempered — I don't know why I already felt sure you must be good-looking, when I still thought of you as an old man. All those years ago, that was the first night I ever dreamt of you, and still I didn't know you.

You moved in yourself the next day, but for all my spying I hadn't managed to catch a glimpse of you yet — which only heightened my curiosity. At last, on the third day, I did see you, and what a surprise it was to find you so different, so wholly unrelated to my childish image of someone resembling God the Father. I had dreamt of a kindly, bespectacled old man, and now here you were — exactly the same as you are today. You are proof against change, the years slide off you! You wore a casual fawn suit, and ran upstairs in your incomparably light, boyish way, always taking two steps at a time. You were carrying your hat, so I saw, with indescribable amazement, your bright, lively face and youthful head of hair; I was truly amazed to find how young, how handsome, how supple, slender and elegant you were. And isn't it strange? In that first second I clearly felt what I, like everyone else, am surprised to find is a unique trait in your character: somehow you are two men at once: one a hot-blooded young man who takes life easily, delighting in games and adventure, but at the same time, in your art, an implacably serious man, conscious of your duty, extremely well read and highly educated. I unconsciously sensed, again like everyone else, that you lead a double life, one side of it bright and open to the world, the other very dark, known to you alone — my thirteen-year-old self, magically attracted to you at first glance, was aware of that profound duality, the secret of your nature.

Do you understand now, beloved, what a miracle, what an enticing enigma you were bound to seem to me as a child? A man whom I revered because he wrote books, because he was famous in that other great world, and suddenly I found out that he was an elegant, boyishly cheerful young man of twenty-five! Need I tell you that from that day on nothing at home, nothing in my entire impoverished childhood world interested me except for you, that with all the doggedness, all the probing persistence of a thirteen-year-old I thought only of you and your life. I observed you, I observed your habits and the people who visited you, and my curiosity about you was increased rather than satisfied, because the duality of your nature was expressed in the wide variety of those visitors. Young people came, friends of yours with whom you laughed in high spirits, lively students, and then there were ladies who drove up in cars, once the director of the opera house, that great conductor whom I had only ever seen from a reverent distance on his rostrum, then again young girls still at commercial college who scurried shyly in through your door, and women visitors in particular, very, very many women. I thought nothing special of that, not even when, on my way to school one morning, I saw a heavily veiled lady leave your apartment — I was only thirteen, after all, and the passionate curiosity with which I spied on your life and lay in wait for you did not, in the child, identify itself as love.

But I still remember, my beloved, the day and the hour when I lost my heart to you entirely and for ever. I had been for a walk with a school friend, and we two girls were standing at the entrance to the building,

talking, when a car drove up, stopped — and you jumped off the running-board with the impatient, agile gait that still fascinates me in you. An instinctive urge came over me to open the door for you, and so I crossed your path and we almost collided. You looked at me with a warm, soft, all-enveloping gaze that was like a caress, smiled at me tenderly — yes, I can put it no other way — and said in a low and almost intimate tone of voice: “Thank you very much, Fräulein.”

That was all, beloved, but from that moment on, after sensing that soft, tender look, I was your slave. I learnt later, in fact quite soon, that you look in the same way at every woman you encounter, every shop girl who sells you something, every housemaid who opens the door to you, with an all-embracing expression that surrounds and yet at the same time undresses a woman, the look of the born seducer; and that glance of yours is not a deliberate expression of will and inclination, but you are entirely unconscious that your tenderness to women makes them feel warm and soft when it is turned on them. However, I did not guess that at the age of thirteen, still a child; it was as if I had been immersed in fire. I thought the tenderness was only for me, for me alone, and in that one second the woman latent in my adolescent self awoke, and she was in thrall to you for ever.

“Who was that?” asked my friend. I couldn’t answer her at once. It was impossible for me to utter your name; in that one single second it had become sacred to me, it was my secret. “Oh, a gentleman who lives in this building,” I stammered awkwardly at last. “Then why did you blush like that when he looked at you?” my friend mocked me, with all the malice of an inquisitive child. And because I felt her touching on my secret with derision, the blood rose to my cheeks more warmly than ever. My embarrassment made me snap at her. “You silly goose!” I said angrily; I could have throttled her. But she just laughed even louder, yet more scornfully, until I felt the tears shoot to my eyes with helpless rage. I left her standing there and ran upstairs.

I loved you from that second on. I know that women have often said those words to you, spoilt as you are. But believe me, no one ever loved you as slavishly, with such dog-like devotion, as the creature I was then and have always remained, for there is nothing on earth like the love of a child that passes unnoticed in the dark because she has no hope: her love is so submissive, so much a servant’s love, passionate and lying in wait, in a way that the avid yet unconsciously demanding love of a grown woman can never be. Only lonely children can keep a passion entirely to themselves; others talk about their feelings in company, wear them away in intimacy with friends, they have heard and read a great deal about love, and know that it is a common fate. They play with it as if it were a toy, they show it off like boys smoking their first cigarette. But as for me, I had no one I could take into my confidence, I was not taught or warned by anyone, I was inexperienced and naive; I flung myself into my fate as if into an abyss. Everything growing and emerging in me knew of nothing but you, the dream of you was my familiar friend. My father had died long ago, my mother was a stranger to me in her eternal sad depression, her anxious pensioner’s worries; more knowing adolescent schoolgirls repelled me because they played so lightly with what to me was the ultimate passion — so with all the concentrated attention of my impatiently emergent nature I brought to bear, on you, everything that would otherwise have been splintered and dispersed. To me, you were — how can I put it? Any one comparison is too slight — you were everything to me, all that mattered. Nothing existed except in so far as it related to you, you were the only point of reference in my life. You changed it entirely. Before, I had been an indifferent pupil at school, and my work was only average; now I was suddenly top of the class, I read a thousand books until late into the night because I knew that you loved books; to my mother’s amazement I suddenly began practising the piano with stubborn persistence because I thought you also loved music. I cleaned and mended my clothes solely to look pleasing and neat in front of you, and I hated the fact that my old school pinafore (a house dress of my mother’s cut down to size) had a square patch on the left side of it. I was afraid you might notice the patch and despise me, so I always kept my school bag pressed over it as I ran up the stairs, trembling with fear in case you saw it. How foolish of me: you never, or almost never, looked at me again

And yet I really did nothing all day but wait for you and look out for you. There was a small brass peephole in our door, and looking through its circular centre I could see your door opposite. This peephole — no, don’t smile, beloved, even today I am still not ashamed of those hours! — was my eye on the world. I sat in

the cold front room, afraid of my mother's suspicions, on the watch for whole afternoons in those months and years, with a book in my hand, tense as a musical string resounding in response to your presence. I was always looking out for you, always in a state of tension, but you felt it as little as the tension of the spring in the watch that you carry in your pocket, patiently counting and measuring your hours in the dark, accompanying your movements with its inaudible heartbeat, while you let your quick glance fall on it only once in a million ticking seconds. I knew everything about you, knew all your habits, every one of your suits and ties, I knew your various acquaintances and could soon tell them apart, dividing them into those whom I liked and those whom I didn't; from my thirteenth to my sixteenth year I lived every hour for you. Oh, what follies I committed! I kissed the door handle that your hand had touched; I stole a cigarette end that you had dropped before coming into the building, and it was sacred to me because your lips had touched it. In the evenings I would run down to the street a hundred times on some pretext or other to see which of your rooms had a light in it, so that I could feel more aware of your invisible presence. And in the weeks when you went away — my heart always missed a beat in anguish when I saw your good manservant Johann carrying your yellow travelling bag downstairs — in those weeks my life was dead and pointless. I went about feeling morose, bored and cross, and I always had to take care that my mother did not notice the despair in my red-rimmed eyes.

Even as I tell you all these things, I know that they were grotesquely extravagant and childish follies. I ought to have been ashamed of them, but I was not, for my love for you was never purer and more passionate than in those childish excesses. I could tell you for hours, days, how I lived with you at that time, and you hardly even knew me by sight, because if I met you on the stairs and there was no avoiding it, I would run past you with my head bent for fear of your burning gaze — like someone plunging into water — just to escape being scorched by its fire. For hours, days I could tell you about those long-gone years of yours, unrolling the whole calendar of your life, but I do not mean to bore you or torment you. I will tell you only about the best experience of my childhood, and I ask you not to mock me because it is something so slight, for to me as a child it was infinite. It must have been on a Sunday. You had gone away, and your servant was dragging the heavy carpets that he had been beating back through the open front door of the apartment. It was hard work for the good man, and in a suddenly bold moment I went up to him and asked if I could help him. He was surprised, but let me do as I suggested, and so I saw — if only I could tell you with what reverent, indeed devout veneration! — I saw your apartment from the inside, your world, the desk where you used to sit, on which a few flowers stood in a blue crystal vase. Your cupboards, your pictures, your books. It was only a fleeting, stolen glimpse of your life, for the faithful Johann would certainly not have let me look closely, but with that one glimpse I took in the whole atmosphere, and now I had nourishment for never-ending dreams of you both waking and sleeping.

That brief moment was the happiest of my childhood. I wanted to tell you about it so that even though you do not know me you may get some inkling of how my life depended on you. I wanted to tell you about that, and about the terrible moment that was, unfortunately, so close to it. I had — as I have already told you — forgotten everything but you, I took no notice of my mother any more, or indeed of anyone else. I hardly noticed an elderly gentleman, a businessman from Innsbruck who was distantly related to my mother by marriage, coming to visit us often and staying for some time; indeed, I welcomed his visits, because then he sometimes took Mama to the theatre, and I could be on my own, thinking of you, looking out for you, which was my greatest and only bliss. One day my mother called me into her room with a certain ceremony, saying she had something serious to discuss with me. I went pale and suddenly heard my heart thudding; did she suspect something, had she guessed? My first thought was of you, the secret that linked me to the world. But my mother herself was ill at ease; she kissed me affectionately once, and then again (as she never usually did), drew me down on the sofa beside her and began to tell me, hesitantly and bashfully, that her relation, who was a widower, had made her a proposal of marriage, and mainly for my sake she had decided to accept him. The hot blood rose to my heart: I had only one thought in answer to what she said, the thought of you.

"But we'll be staying here, won't we?" I just managed to stammer.

"No, we're moving to Innsbruck. Ferdinand has a lovely villa there."

I heard no more. Everything went black before my eyes. Later, I knew that I had fallen down in a faint; I heard my mother, her voice lowered, quietly telling my prospective stepfather, who had been waiting outside the door, that I had suddenly stepped back with my hands flung out, and then I fell to the floor like a lump of lead. I cannot tell you what happened in the next few days, how I, a powerless child, tried to resist my mother's all-powerful will; as I write, my hand still trembles when I think of it. I could not give my real secret away, so my resistance seemed like mere obstinacy, malice and defiance. No one spoke to me, it was all done behind my back. They used the hours when I was at school to arrange our move; when I came back, something else had always been cleared away or sold. I saw our home coming apart, and my life with it, and one day when I came in for lunch, the removals men had been to pack everything and take it all away. Our packed suitcases stood in the empty rooms, with two camp beds for my mother and me; we were to sleep there one more night, the last, and then travel to Innsbruck the next day.

On that last day I felt, with sudden resolution, that I could not live without being near you. I knew of nothing but you that could save me. I shall never be able to say what I was thinking of, or whether I was capable of thinking clearly at all in those hours of despair, but suddenly — my mother was out — I stood up in my school clothes, just as I was, and walked across the corridor to your apartment. Or rather, I did not so much walk; it was more as if, with my stiff legs and trembling joints, I was magnetically attracted to your door. As I have said before, I had no clear idea what I wanted. Perhaps to fall at your feet and beg you to keep me as a maidservant, a slave, and I am afraid you will smile at this innocent devotion on the part of a fifteen-year-old, but — beloved, you would not smile if you knew how I stood out in that ice-cold corridor, rigid with fear yet impelled by an incomprehensible power, and how I forced my trembling arm away from my body so that it rose and — after a struggle in an eternity of terrible seconds — placed a finger on the bell-push by the door handle and pressed it. To this day I can hear its shrill ringing in my ears, and then the silence afterwards when my blood seemed to stop flowing, and I listened to find out if you were coming.

But you did not come. No one came. You were obviously out that afternoon, and Johann must have gone shopping, so with the dying sound of the bell echoing in my ears I groped my way back to our destroyed, emptied apartment and threw myself down on a plaid rug, as exhausted by the four steps I had taken as if I had been trudging through deep snow for hours. But underneath that exhaustion my determination to see you, to speak to you before they tore me away, was still burning as brightly as ever. There was, I swear it, nothing sensual in my mind; I was still ignorant, for the very reason that I thought of nothing but you. I only wanted to see you, see you once more, cling to you. I waited for you all night, beloved, all that long and terrible night. As soon as my mother had got into bed and fallen asleep I slipped into the front room, to listen for your footsteps when you came home. I waited all night, and it was icy January weather. I was tired, my limbs hurt, and there was no armchair left in the room for me to sit in, so I lay down flat on the cold floor, in the draught that came in under the door. I lay on the painfully cold floor in nothing but my thin dress all night, for I took no blanket with me; I did not want to be warm for fear of falling asleep and failing to hear your step. It hurt; I got cramp in my feet, my arms were shaking; I had to keep standing up, it was so cold in that dreadful darkness. But I waited and waited and waited for you, as if for my fate.

At last — it must have been two or three in the morning — I heard the front door of the building being unlocked down below, and then footsteps coming upstairs. The cold had left me as if dropping away, heat shot through me; I quietly opened the door to rush towards you and fall at your feet... oh, I don't know what I would have done, such a foolish child as I was then. The steps came closer and closer, I saw the flicker of candlelight. Shaking, I clung to the door handle. Was it you coming?

Yes. It was you, beloved — but you were not alone. I heard a soft, provocative laugh, the rustle of a silk dress, and your lowered voice — you were coming home with a woman...

How I managed to survive that night I do not know. Next morning, at eight o'clock, they dragged me off to Innsbruck; I no longer had the strength to resist.

My child died last night — and now I shall be alone again, if I must really go on living. They will come tomorrow, strange, hulking, black-clad men bringing a coffin, and they will put him in it, my poor boy, my

only child. Perhaps friends will come as well, bringing flowers, but what do flowers on a coffin mean? They will comfort me, and say this and that — words, words, how can they help me? I know that I must be alone again when they have gone. I felt it then, in those two endless years in Innsbruck, the years from my sixteenth to my eighteenth birthday, when I lived like a prisoner or an outcast in my family. My stepfather, a very placid, taciturn man, was kind to me; my mother seemed ready to grant all my wishes, as if atoning for her unwitting injustice to me; young people tried to make friends with me, but I rejected all their advances with passionate defiance. I didn't want to live happy and content away from you, I entrenched myself in a dark world of self-torment and loneliness. I didn't wear the brightly coloured new clothes they bought me, I refused to go to concerts or the theatre, or on outings in cheerful company. I hardly went out at all: would you believe it, beloved, I didn't come to know more than ten streets of the little town in the two years I lived there? I was in mourning, and I wanted to mourn, I became intoxicated by every privation that I imposed on myself over and beyond the loss of you. And I did not want to be distracted from my passion to live only for you. I stayed at home alone for hours, days, doing nothing but thinking of you again and again, always reviving my hundred little memories of you, every time I met you, every time I waited for you, staging those little incidents in my mind as if in a theatre. And that is why, because I went over every second of the past countless times, I retain such a vivid memory of my whole childhood that I feel every minute of those past years with as much heat and ardour as if they were only yesterday.

My life at the time was lived entirely through you. I bought all your books; when your name was in the newspaper it was a red-letter day. Would you believe that I know every line of your books by heart, I have read them so often? If anyone were to wake me from sleep at night and quote a random line from them, I could still, thirteen years later, go on reciting the text from there, as if in a dream: every word of yours was my Gospel and prayer book. The whole world existed only in relation to you; I read about concerts and premieres in the Viennese newspapers with the sole aim of wondering which of them might interest you, and when evening came I was with you, even though I was so far away: now he is going into the auditorium, now he is sitting down. I dreamt of that a thousand times because I had once seen you at a concert.

But why describe this raving, tragic, hopeless devotion on the part of an abandoned child feeling angry with herself, why describe it to a man who never guessed at it or knew about it? Yet was I really still a child at that time? I reached the age of seventeen, eighteen — young men turned to look at me in the street, but that only embittered me. To love, or even merely play at love with anyone but you was so inexplicable to me, so unimaginably strange an idea, that merely feeling tempted to indulge in it would have seemed to me a crime. My passion for you was the same as ever, except that my body was changing, and now that my senses were awakened it was more glowing, physical, womanly. And what the child with her sombre, untaught will, the child who had pressed your doorbell, could not guess at was now my only thought: to give myself to you, devote myself to you.

The people around me thought me timid, called me shy (I had kept my secret strictly to myself). But I was developing an iron will. All that I thought and did tended in one direction: back to Vienna, back to you. And I imposed my will by force, senseless and extraordinary as it might seem to anyone else. My stepfather was a prosperous man, and regarded me as his own child. But I insisted, with grim obstinacy, that I wanted to earn my own living, and at last I managed to get a position with a relation as an assistant in a large ready-to-wear dress shop.

Need I tell you where I went first when I arrived back in Vienna — at last, at last! — one misty autumn evening? I left my case at the station, boarded a tram — how slowly it seemed to be going, I bitterly resented every stop — and hurried to the apartment building. There was light in your windows; my whole heart sang. Only now did the city, strange to me these days with its pointless roar of traffic, come to life, only now did I come to life again myself, knowing that I was near you, you, my only dream. I did not guess that in reality I was as far from your mind now, when only the thin, bright glass pane stood between you and my radiant gaze, as if valleys, mountains and rivers separated us. I merely looked up and up; there was light there, here was the building, and there were you, the whole world to me. I had dreamt of this hour for two years, and now I was granted it. I stood outside your windows all that long, mild, cloudy evening, until the light in them went out. Only then did I go home to the place where I was staying.

Every evening after that I stood outside your building in the same way. I worked in the shop until six; it was hard, strenuous work, but I liked it, because all the activity there made me feel my own restlessness less painfully. And as soon as the iron shutters rolled down behind me I hurried to my desired destination. My will was set on seeing you just once, meeting you just once, so that my eyes could see your face again, if only from a distance. And after about a week it finally happened: I met you at a moment when I didn't expect it. Just as I was looking up at your windows, you came across the street. Suddenly I was that thirteen-year-old child again, and felt the blood rise to my cheeks. Instinctively, against my innermost urge to feel your eyes on me, I lowered my head and hurried past you, quick as lightning. Afterwards I was ashamed of my timid flight, the reaction of a schoolgirl, for now I knew very clearly what I wanted: I wanted to meet you, I was seeking you out, I wanted you to recognize me after all those years of weary longing, wanted you to take some notice of me, wanted you to love me.

But it was a long time before you really noticed me, although I stood out in your street every evening, even in flurries of snow and the keen, cutting wind of Vienna. I often waited in vain for hours, and often, in the end, you left the building in the company of friends. Twice I saw you with women, and now that I was an adult I sensed what was new and different about my feeling for you from the sudden tug at my heartstrings, wrenching them right apart, when I saw a strange woman walking so confidently arm in arm with you. I was not surprised. After all, I knew about your succession of women visitors from my childhood days, but now it hurt me physically, and I was torn between hostility and desire in the face of your obvious intimacy with someone else. One day, childishly proud as I was and perhaps still am, I stayed away from your building, but what a terrible, empty evening of defiance and rebellion I spent! Next evening, once again, I was standing humbly outside your building waiting, waiting, just as I had spent my whole life standing outside your life, which was closed to me.

And at last one evening you did notice me. I had already seen you coming in the distance, and I steeled my will not to avoid you. As chance would have it, a cart waiting to be unloaded obstructed the street, and you had to pass close to me. Involuntarily your absent-minded gaze fell on me, and as soon as it met the attention of my own eyes — oh, what a shock the memory gave me! — it became that look you give women, the tender, all-enveloping, all-embracing gaze that also strips them, the look that, when I was a child, had made me into a loving woman for the first time. For one or two seconds that gaze held mine, which neither could nor wished to tear itself away — and then you had passed me. My heart was beating fast; instinctively I slowed my pace, and as I turned, out of a curiosity that I could not master, I saw that you too had stopped and were still looking at me. And the way you observed me, with such interest and curiosity, told me at once that you did not recognize me.

You did not recognize me, neither then nor ever, you never recognized me. How can I describe to you, beloved, the disappointment of that moment? That was the first time I suffered it, the disappointment of going unrecognized by you. I have lived with it all my life, I am dying with it, and still you do not recognize me. How can I make you understand my disappointment? During those two years in Innsbruck, when I thought of you every hour and did nothing but imagine our next meeting back in Vienna, I had dreamt of the wildest — or the most blissful — possibilities, depending on my mood at the time. I had dreamt, if I may so put it, of everything; in dark moments I had pictured you rejecting me, despising me for being too uninteresting, too ugly, too importunate. In passionate visions I had gone through all forms of your disfavour, your coldness, your indifference — but in no moment of dark emotion, not even in full awareness of my inferiority, had I ventured to envisage this, the worst thing of all: the fact that you had never even noticed my existence. Today I understand it — ah, you have taught me to understand it! — I realize that, to a man, a girl's or a woman's face must have something extraordinarily changeable in it, because it is usually only a mirror reflecting now passion, now childishness, now weariness, and passes by as a reflection does; so that a man can easily forget a woman's face because age changes its light and shade, and different clothes give her a new setting. Those who are resigned to their fate really know that. However, still a girl at the time, I could not yet grasp your forgetfulness, because somehow my immoderate, constant concern with you had made me feel — although it was a delusion — that you, too, must often think of me, you would be waiting for me; how could I have gone on breathing in the certainty that I was nothing to you, no memory of

me ever touched you, however lightly? And this moment, when your eyes showed me that nothing in you recognized me, no thin gossamer line of memory reached from your life to mine, was my first fall into the depths of reality, my first inkling of my destiny.

You did not recognize me at that time. And when, two days later, we met again, your eyes rested on me with a certain familiarity, you still did not recognize me as the girl who loved you and whom you had woken to life, but only as the pretty eighteen-year-old who had met you in the same place two days earlier. You looked at me in surprise, but in a friendly manner, with a slight smile playing round your mouth. Once again you passed me, once again immediately slowing your pace; I trembled, I rejoiced, I prayed that you would speak to me. I felt that, for the first time, you saw me as a living woman; I myself slowed down and did not avoid you. And suddenly I sensed you behind me; without turning round I knew that now, for the first time, I would hear your beloved voice speaking directly to me. Expectation paralysed me; I feared I would have to stop where I was because my heart was thudding so violently — and then you were beside me. You spoke to me in your easy, cheerful way, as if we had been on friendly terms for a long time — oh, you had no idea about me, you have never had any idea of my life! — so captivatingly free and easy was the way you spoke to me that I was even able to answer you. We walked all down the street side by side. Then you suggested that we might go and have something to eat together. I agreed. What would I ever have dared to deny you?

We ate together in a small restaurant — do you still know where it was? No, I am sure you don't distinguish it now from other such evenings, for who was I to you? One among hundreds, one adventure in an ever-continuing chain. And what was there for you to remember about me? I said little, because it made me so infinitely happy to have you near me, to hear you speaking to me. I did not want to waste a moment of it by asking questions or saying something foolish. I shall never forget my gratitude to you for that hour, or how entirely you responded to my passionate reverence, how tender, light and tactful you were, entirely without making importunate advances, entirely without any hasty, caressing gestures of affection, and from the first moment striking a note of such certain and friendly familiarity that you would have won my heart even if it had not been yours long ago, given with all my goodwill. Ah, you have no idea what a wonderful thing you did in not disappointing my five years of childish expectation!

It was getting late; we left the restaurant. At the door you asked me whether I was in a hurry or still had time to spare. How could I have failed to show that I was ready for you? I said that I could indeed spare some time. Then you asked, quickly surmounting a slight hesitation, whether I would like to go to your apartment and talk. "Oh, most happily," I said, and it came out of the fullness of my feelings so naturally that I noticed at once how you reacted, in either embarrassment or pleasure, to my quick tongue — but you were also visibly surprised. Today I understand why you were astonished; I know it is usual for women, even when they long to give themselves, to deny that readiness, pretending to be alarmed or indignant, so that first they have to be reassured by urgent pleading, lies, vows and promises. I know that perhaps only prostitutes, the professionals of love, or perhaps very naive adolescents, respond to such an invitation with such wholehearted, joyful consent as mine. But in me — and how could you guess that? — it was only my will put into words, the concentrated longing of a thousand days breaking out. In any case, you were struck; I began to interest you. I sensed that, as we were walking along, you glanced sideways at me with a kind of astonishment while we talked. Your feelings, your magically sure sense of all that is human, immediately scented something unusual here, a secret in this pretty, compliant girl. Your curiosity was awakened, and I noticed, from your circling, probing questions, that you wanted to discover the mystery. But I evaded you; it would be better to seem foolish than to let you know my secret.

We went up to your apartment. Forgive me, beloved, when I tell you that you cannot understand what that corridor, that staircase meant to me — what turmoil and confusion there was in my mind, what headlong, painful, almost mortal happiness. Even now I can hardly think of it without tears, and I have none of those left. But imagine that every object in the building was, so to speak, imbued with my passion, each was a symbol of my childhood, my longing: the gate where I had waited for you thousands of times, the stairs from which I always listened for your footsteps, and where I had seen you for the first time, the peephole through which I had stared my soul out, the doormat outside your door where I had once knelt, the click of the key at which I had always leapt up from where I was lying in wait. All my childhood, all my passion were here in

those few metres of space; this was my whole life, and now it came over me like a storm, everything, everything was coming true, and I was with you, going into your, into our apartment building. Think of it — it sounds banal, but I can't put it any other way — as if going only as far as your door had been my reality all my life, my sombre everyday world, but beyond it a child's magic realm began, the realm of Aladdin, remember that I had stared a thousand times, with burning eyes, at the door through which I now stepped, almost reeling, and you will guess — but only guess, you can never entirely know, beloved! — what that tumultuous minute meant in my life.

I stayed with you all night. You did not realize that no man had ever touched me before, had ever felt or seen my body. But how could you guess that, beloved, when I offered no resistance, showed no bashful hesitancy, so that you could have no idea of my secret love for you? It would certainly have alarmed you, for you love only what is light and playful, weightless, you are afraid of intervening in someone else's life. You want to give of yourself to everyone, to the world, but you do not want sacrificial victims. If I tell you now, beloved, that I was a virgin when I gave myself to you, I beg you not to misunderstand me! I am not accusing you, you did not entice me, lie to me, seduce me — it was I who pressed myself on you, threw myself on your breast and into my own fate. I will never, never blame you for anything, I will only thank you for the richness of that night, sparkling with desire, hovering in bliss. When I opened my eyes in the dark and felt you at my side, I was surprised not to see the stars above me, I could feel heaven so close — no, I never regretted it, beloved, for the sake of that hour I never regretted it. I remember that when you were asleep and I heard your breathing, felt your body, while I was so close to you, I shed tears of happiness in the dark.

In the morning I was in a hurry to leave early. I had to go to the shop, and I also wanted to be gone before your manservant arrived; I couldn't have him seeing me. When I was dressed and stood in front of you, you took me in your arms and gave me a long look; was some dark and distant memory stirring in you, or did I merely seem to you beautiful, happy as indeed I was? Then you kissed me on the mouth. I gently drew away, about to go. "Won't you take a few flowers with you?" you asked, and I said yes. You took four white roses out of the blue crystal vase on the desk (which I knew from that one stolen childhood glance) and gave them to me. I was still kissing them days later.

We had arranged to meet again another evening. I went, and again it was wonderful. You gave me a third night. Then you said you had to go away — oh, how I hated those journeys of yours even in my childhood! — and promised to get in touch with me as soon as you were back. I gave you a poste restante address. I didn't want to tell you my name. I kept my secret. And again you gave me a few roses when you said goodbye — goodbye.

Every day for two whole months I went to ask if any post had come... but no, why describe the hellish torment of waiting, why describe my despair to you? I am not blaming you, I love you as the man you are, hot-blooded and forgetful, ardent and inconstant, I love you just as you always were and as you still are. You had come back long ago, I could tell that by the light in your windows, and you did not write to me. I have not had a line from you to this day and these last hours of mine, not a line from you to whom I gave my life. I waited, I waited in despair. But you did not get in touch with me, you never wrote me a line... not a line...

My child died yesterday — he was also yours. He was your child, beloved, conceived on one of those three nights, I swear it, and no one tells lies in the shadow of death. He was our child, and I swear it to you, because no man touched me between those hours when I gave myself to you and the time when he made his way out of my body. I was sacred to myself because of your touch; how could I have shared myself with you, who had been everything to me, and other men who passed by touching my life only slightly? He was our child, beloved, the child of my conscious love and your careless, passing, almost unconscious affection, our child, our son, our only child. You will ask — perhaps alarmed, perhaps only surprised — you will ask, beloved, why I kept the child secret all these long years, and mention him only today, now that he lies here sleeping in the dark, sleeping for ever, ready to leave and never return, never again? But how could I have told you? You would never have believed me, a stranger who showed herself only too willing on those three nights, who gave herself to you without resistance, indeed with desire, you would never have believed the

anonymous woman of your fleeting encounter if she said she was keeping faith with you, the faithless — you would never have considered the child your own without suspicion! Even if what I said had seemed probable to you, you would never have been able to dismiss the secret suspicion that I was trying to palm off some other man's child on you because you were prosperous. You would have suspected me, a shadow would have remained, a fugitive, tentative shadow of distrust between us. I didn't want that. And then I know you; I know you rather better than you know yourself. I know that it would have been difficult for you, who love the carefree, light-hearted, playful aspect of love, suddenly to be a father, suddenly responsible for someone else's life. You can breathe only at liberty; you would have felt bound to me in some way. You would have hated me for that — I know that you would have done so, against your own conscious will. Perhaps only for hours, perhaps only for fleeting minutes I would have been a burden to you, a hated burden — but in my pride I wanted you to think of me all your life without any anxiety. I preferred to take it all on myself rather than burden you, I wanted to be the only one among all your women of whom you always thought with love and gratitude. But the fact is that you never thought of me at all, you forgot me.

I am not blaming you, my beloved, no, I am not blaming you. Forgive me if a touch of bitterness flows into my pen now and then, forgive me — my child, our child lies dead in the flickering candlelight; I clenched my fists against God and called him a murderer, my senses are confused and dulled. Forgive my lament, forgive me! I know that deep in your heart you are good and helpful, you help everyone, even a total stranger who asks for help. But your kindness is so strange, it is open to all to take as much of it as they can hold, it is great, infinitely great, your kindness, but it is — forgive me — it is passive. It wants to be appealed to, to be taken. You help when you are called upon to help, when you are asked for help, you help out of shame, out of weakness, and not out of joy. You do not — let me say so openly — you do not like those who are in need and torment any better than their happier brothers. And it is hard to ask anything of people like you, even the kindest of them. Once, when I was still a child looking through the peephole in our door, I saw you give something to a beggar who had rung your bell. You gave him money readily before he asked you, even a good deal of it, but you gave it with a certain anxiety and in haste, wanting him to go away again quickly; it was as if you were afraid to look him in the face. I have never forgotten your uneasy, timid way of helping, fleeing from gratitude. And so I never turned to you. Certainly I know that you would have stood by me then, even without any certainty that the child was yours. You would have comforted me, you would have given me money, plenty of money, but never with anything but a secret impatience to push what was unwelcome away from you; yes, I believe you might even have asked me to do away with the child before its birth. And I feared that more than anything — because what would I not have done if you wanted it, how could I have denied you anything? However, that child meant everything to me, because it was yours, yourself again but no longer as a happy, carefree man whom I could not hold, yourself given to me for ever — so I thought — there in my body, a part of my own life. Now at last I had caught you, I could sense your life growing in my veins, I could give you food and drink, caress and kiss you when my heart burned for that. You see, beloved, that is why I was so blissfully happy when I knew that I was carrying a child of yours, that is why I never told you, because then you could not escape from me again.

To be sure, beloved, they were not such blissful months as I had anticipated in my mind, they were also months of horror and torment, of revulsion at the vileness of humanity. I did not have an easy time. I could not work in the shop during the final months, or my relative would have noticed and sent news home. I did not want to ask my mother for money — so I eked out an existence until the baby's birth by selling what little jewellery I had. A week before he was born, my last few crowns were stolen from a cupboard by a washerwoman, so I had to go to the maternity hospital where only very poor women, the outcasts and forgotten, drag themselves in their need. And the child — your child — was born there in the midst of misery. It was a deadly place: strange, everything was strange, we women lying there were strange to each other, lonely and hating one another out of misery, the same torment in that crowded ward full of chloroform and blood, screams and groans. I suffered the humiliation, the mental and physical shame that poverty has to bear from the company of prostitutes and the sick who made our common fate feel terrible, from the cynicism of young doctors who stripped back the sheets from defenceless women with an ironic smile and felt them with false medical expertise, from the greed of the nurses — in there, a woman's bashfulness was crucified with looks and scourged with words. The notice with your name in such a place is

all that is left of you, for what lies in the bed is only a twitching piece of flesh felt by the curious, an object to be put on display and studied — the women who bear children at home to husbands waiting affectionately for the birth do not know what it means to give birth to a baby alone and defenceless, as if one were on the laboratory table! If I read the word “hell” in a book to this day, I suddenly and against my conscious will think of that crowded, steamy ward full of sighs, laughter, blood and screams, that slaughterhouse of shame where I suffered.

Forgive me, forgive me for telling you about it. I do so only this one time, never again, never. I have said nothing for eleven years, and I will soon be silent for all eternity; just once I must cry out and say what a high price I paid for my child, the child who was all my bliss and now lies there with no breath left in his body. I had forgotten those hours long ago in his smile and voice, in my happiness, but now he is dead the torment revives, and I had to scream out from my heart just this one time. But I do not accuse you — only God, only God, who made that torment point-less. I do not blame you, I swear it, and never did I rise against you in anger. Even in the hour when I was writhing in labour, when my body burned with shame under the inquisitive eyes of the students, even in the second when the pain tore my soul apart, I never accused you before God. I never regretted those nights or my love for you, I always blessed the day you met me. And if I had to go through the hell of those hours again and knew in advance what was waiting for me I would do it again, my beloved, I would do it again a thousand times over!

Our child died yesterday — you never knew him. Never, even in a fleeting encounter by chance, did your eyes fall on him in passing. I kept myself hidden away from you for a long time once I had my son; my longing for you had become less painful, indeed I think I loved you less passionately, or at least I did not suffer from my love so much now that I had been given the child. I did not want to divide myself between you and him, so I gave myself not to you, a happy man living without me, but to the son who needed me, whom I must nourish, whom I could kiss and embrace. I seemed to be saved from my restless desire for you, saved from my fate by that other self of yours who was really mine — only occasionally, very occasionally, did my feelings humbly send my thoughts out to where you lived. I did just one thing: on your birthday I always sent you a bunch of white roses, exactly the same as the roses you gave me after our first night of love. Have you ever wondered in these ten or eleven years who sent them? Did you perhaps remember the woman to whom you once gave such roses? I don't know, and I will never know your answer. Merely giving them to you out of the dark was enough for me, letting my memory of that moment flower again once a year.

You never knew our poor child — today I blame myself for keeping him from you, because you would have loved him. You never knew the poor boy, never saw him smile when he gently opened his eyelids and cast the clear, happy light of his clever, dark eyes — your eyes! — on me, on the whole world. Oh, he was so cheerful, such a dear; all the light-hearted nature of your being came out again in him in childish form, your quick, lively imagination was reborn. He could play with things for hours, entranced, just as you play with life, and then sit over his books, serious again, his eyebrows raised. He became more and more like you; the duality of gravity and playfulness that is so much your own was visibly beginning to develop in him, and the more like you he grew to be, the more I loved him. He studied hard at school, he could talk French like a little magpie, his exercise books were the neatest in the class, and he was so pretty too, so elegant in his black velvet suit or his white sailor jacket. Wherever he went he was the most elegant of all; when I took him to the Adriatic seaside resort of Grado, women stopped on the beach to stroke his long, fair hair; in Semmering, when he tobogganed downhill, everyone turned admiringly to look at him. He was so good-looking, so tender, so attractive; when he went to be a boarder at the Theresian Academy last year he wore his uniform and his little sword like an eighteenth-century pageboy — now he wears nothing but his nightshirt, poor boy, lying there with pale lips and folded hands.

You may perhaps be wondering how I could afford to bring the child up in such luxury, allowing him to live the cheerful, carefree life of the upper classes. Dearest, I speak to you out of the darkness; I am not ashamed, I will tell you, but do not alarm yourself, beloved — I sold myself. I was not exactly what they call a streetwalker, a common prostitute, but I sold myself. I had rich friends, rich lovers; first I went in search of them, then they sought me out, because I was — did you ever notice? — very beautiful. Everyone to whom I gave myself grew fond of me, they all thanked me and felt attached to me, they all loved me — except for

you, except for you, my beloved!

Do you despise me now for telling you that I sold myself? No, I know you do not; you understand everything, and you will also understand that I did it only for you, for your other self, your child. Once, in that ward in the maternity hospital, I had touched the worst aspect of poverty, I knew that the poor of this world are always downtrodden, humiliated, victims, and I would not have your child, your bright, beautiful son growing up deep down in the scum of society, in the dark, mean streets, the polluted air of a room at the back of an apartment building. I did not want his tender mouth to know the language of the gutter, or his white body to wear the fusty, shabby garments of the poor — your child was to have everything, all the riches, all the ease on earth; he was to rise to be your equal, in your own sphere of life.

That, my beloved, was my only reason for selling myself. It was no sacrifice for me, since what people usually call honour and dishonour meant nothing to me; you did not love me, and you were the only one to whom my body truly belonged, so I felt indifferent to anything else that happened to it. The caresses of those men, even their most ardent passion did not touch me deeply at all, although I had to go very carefully with many of them, and my sympathy for their unrequited love often shook me when I remembered what my own fate had been. All of them were good to me, all of them indulged me, they all showed me respect. There was one in particular, an older man, a widower who was an imperial count, the same man who wore himself out going from door to door to get my fatherless child, your child, accepted into the Theresian Academy — he loved me as if I were his daughter. He asked me to marry him three or four times — I could be a countess today, mistress of an enchanting castle in the Tyrol, living a carefree life, because the child would have had a loving father who adored him, and I would have had a quiet, distinguished, kindly husband at my side — but I did not accept him, however often he urged me, and however much my refusals hurt him. Perhaps it was folly, for then I would be living somewhere safe and quiet now, and my beloved child with me, but — why should I not tell you? — I did not want to tie myself down, I wanted to be free for you at any time. In my inmost heart, the depths of my unconscious nature, my old childhood dream that one day you might yet summon me to you, if only for an hour, lived on. And for the possibility of that one hour I rejected all else, so that I would be free to answer your first call. What else had my whole life been since I grew past childhood but waiting, waiting to know your will?

And that hour really did come, but you do not know it. You have no inkling of it, beloved! Even then you did not recognize me — you never, never, never recognized me! I had met you a number of times, at the theatre, at concerts, in the Prater, in the street — every time my heart leapt up, but you looked past me; outwardly I was so different now, the shy child had become a woman, said to be beautiful, wearing expensive clothes, surrounded by admirers: how could you detect in me that shy girl in the dim light of your bedroom? Sometimes the man who was with me greeted you, you greeted him in return and looked at me, but your glance was that of a courteous stranger, appreciative but never recognizing me: strange, terribly strange. Once, I still remember, that failure to recognize me, although I was almost used to it, became a burning torment. I was sitting in a box at the Opera House with a lover and you were in the box next to ours. The lights dimmed during the overture, and I could no longer see your face, I only felt your breath as near to me as it had been that first night, and your hand, your fine and delicate hand lay on the velvet-upholstered partition between our boxes. And at last I was overcome by longing to bend down to that strange but beloved hand, the hand whose touch I had once felt holding me, and kiss it humbly. The music was rising tempestuously around me, my longing was more and more passionate, I had to exert all my self-control and force myself to sit there, so powerfully were my lips drawn to your beloved hand. After the first act I asked my lover to leave with me. I could not bear it any more, knowing that you were sitting beside me in the dark, so strange to me and yet so close.

But the hour did come, it came once more, one last time in my buried, secret life. It was almost exactly a year ago, on the day after your birthday. Strange: I had been thinking of you all those hours, because I always celebrated your birthday like a festival. I had gone out very early in the morning to buy the white roses that I asked the shop to send you, as I did every year, in memory of an hour that you had forgotten. In the afternoon I went out with my son, I took him to Demel's café and in the evening to the theatre; I wanted him, too, to feel from his early youth that this day, although he did not know its significance, was in some

mystical fashion an occasion to be celebrated. Then next day I was out with my lover of the time, a rich young manufacturer from Brünn who adored and indulged me, and wanted to marry me like the rest of them — and whose proposals I had turned down apparently for no good reason, as with the rest of them, although he showered presents on me and the child, and was even endearing in his rather awkward, submissive way. We went together to a concert, where we met cheerful companions, had supper in a restaurant in the Ringstrasse, and there, amidst laughter and talking, I suggested going on to the Tabarin, a café with a dance floor. I normally disliked cafés of that kind, with their organized, alcoholic merriment, like all similar kinds of “fun”, and usually objected to such suggestions, but this time — as if some unfathomable magical power in me suddenly and unconsciously caused me to suggest it in the midst of the others’ cheerful excitement — I had a sudden, inexplicable wish to go, as if something special were waiting for me there. Since I was accustomed to getting my way, they all quickly stood up, we went to the Tabarin, drank champagne, and I fell suddenly into a fit of hectic, almost painful merriment, something unusual in me. I drank and drank, sang sentimental songs with the others, and almost felt an urge to dance or rejoice. But suddenly — I felt as if something either cold or blazing hot had been laid on my heart — I stopped short: you were sitting with some friends at the next table, looking admiringly at me, with an expression of desire, the expression that could always send my entire body into a state of turmoil. For the first time in ten years you were looking at me again with all the unconsciously passionate force of your being. I trembled, and the glass that I had raised almost fell from my hands. Fortunately my companions did not notice my confusion: it was lost in the noise of the laughter and music.

Your gaze was more and more ardent, immersing me entirely in fire. I did not know whether at last, at long last, you had recognized me, or you desired me again as someone else, a stranger. The blood shot into my cheeks, I answered my companions at our table distractedly. You must have noticed how confused your gaze made me. Then, unseen by the others, you signed to me with a movement of your head a request to go out of the café for a moment. You ostentatiously paid your bill, said goodbye to your friends and left, not without first indicating to me again that you would wait for me outside. I was trembling as if in frost, as if in a fever, I could not answer anyone, I could not control my own racing blood. As chance would have it, at that very moment a pair of black dancers launched into one of those newfangled modern dances with clattering heels and shrill cries; everyone was watching them, and I made use of that second. I stood up, told my lover that I would be back in a moment, and followed you.

You were standing outside the cloakroom, waiting for me; your expression brightened as I came out. Smiling, you hurried to meet me; I saw at once that you didn’t recognize me, not as the child of the past or the young girl of a couple of years later. Once again you were approaching me as someone new to you, an unknown stranger.

“Would you have an hour to spare for me, too, sometime?” you asked in confidential tones — I sensed, from the assurance of your manner, that you took me for one of those women who can be bought for an evening.

“Yes,” I said, the same tremulous yet of course compliant “Yes” that the girl had said to you in the twilight street over a decade ago.

“Then when can we meet?” you asked.

“Whenever you like,” I replied — I had no shame in front of you. You looked at me in slight surprise, the same suspiciously curious surprise as you had shown all that time ago when my swift consent had startled you before.

“Could it be now?” you asked, a little hesitantly.

“Yes,” I said. “Let’s go.”

I was going to the cloakroom to collect my coat. Then it occurred to me that my lover had the cloakroom ticket for both our coats. Going back to ask him for it would have been impossible without offering some elaborate reason, but on the other hand I was not going to give up the hour with you that I had longed for all

these years. So I did not for a second hesitate; I just threw my shawl over my evening dress and went out into the damp, misty night without a thought for the coat, without a thought for the kindly, affectionate man who had been keeping me, although I was humiliating him in front of his friends, making him look like a fool whose lover runs away from him after years the first time a stranger whistles to her. Oh, I was entirely aware of the vile, shameful ingratitude of my conduct to an honest friend; I felt that I was being ridiculous, and mortally injuring a kind man for ever in my madness — but what was friendship to me, what was my whole life compared with my impatience to feel the touch of your lips again, to hear you speak softly close to me? I loved you so much, and now that it is all over and done with I can tell you so. And I believe that if you summoned me from my deathbed I would suddenly find the strength in myself to get up and go with you.

There was a car outside the entrance, and we drove to your apartment. I heard your voice again, I felt your tender presence close to me, and was as bemused, as childishly happy as before. As I climbed those stairs again after more than ten years — no, no, I cannot describe how I still felt everything doubly in those seconds, the past and the present, and in all of it only you mattered. Not much was different in your room, a few more pictures, more books, and here and there new pieces of furniture, but still it all looked familiar to me. And the vase of roses stood on the desk — my roses, sent to you the day before on your birthday, in memory of someone whom you did not remember, did not recognize even now that she was close to you, hand in hand and lips to lips. But all the same, it did me good to think that you looked after the flowers: it meant that a breath of my love and of myself did touch you.

You took me in your arms. Once again I spent a whole, wonderful night with you. But you did not even recognize my naked body. In bliss, I accepted your expert caresses and saw that your passion draws no distinction between someone you really love and a woman selling herself, that you give yourself up entirely to your desire, unthinkingly squandering the wealth of your nature. You were so gentle and affectionate with me, a woman picked up in the dance café, so warmly and sensitively respectful, yet at the same time enjoying possession of a woman so passionately; once more, dizzy with my old happiness, I felt your unique duality — a knowing, intellectual passion mingled with sensuality. It was what had already brought me under your spell when I was a child. I have never felt such concentration on the moment of the act of love in any other man, such an outburst and reflection of his deepest being — although then, of course, it was to be extinguished in endless, almost inhuman oblivion. But I also forgot myself; who was I, now, in the dark beside you? Was I the ardent child of the past, was I the mother of your child, was I a stranger? Oh, it was all so familiar, I had known it all before, and again it was all so intoxicatingly new on that passionate night. I prayed that it would never end.

But morning came, we got up late, you invited me to stay for breakfast with you. Together we drank the tea that an invisible servant had discreetly placed ready in the dining room, and we talked. Again, you spoke to me with the open, warm confidence of your nature, and again without any indiscreet questions or curiosity about myself. You did not ask my name or where I lived: once more I was just an adventure to you, an anonymous woman, an hour of heated passion dissolving without trace in the smoke of oblivion. You told me that you were about to go away for some time, you would be in North Africa for two or three months. I trembled in the midst of my happiness, for already words were hammering in my ears: all over, gone and forgotten! I wished I could fall at your feet and cry out, "Take me with you, recognize me at last, at long last, after so many years!" But I was so timid, so cowardly, so slavish and weak in front of you. I could only say, "What a pity!"

You looked at me with a smile. "Are you really sorry?"

Then a sudden wildness caught hold of me. I stood up and looked at you, a long, hard look. And then I said, "The man I loved was always going away too." I looked at you, I looked you right in the eye. Now, now he will recognize me, I thought urgently, trembling.

But you smiled at me and said consolingly, "People come back again."

"Yes," I said, "they come back, but then they have forgotten."

There must have been something odd, something passionate in the way I said that to you. For you rose to your feet as well and looked at me, affectionately and very surprised. You took me by the shoulders. "What's good is not forgotten; I will not forget you," you said, and as you did so you gazed intently at me as if to memorize my image. And as I felt your eyes on me, seeking, sensing, clinging to you with all my being, I thought that at last, at last the spell of blindness would be broken. He will recognize me now, I thought, he will recognize me now! My whole soul trembled in that thought.

But you did not recognize me. No, you did not know me again, and I had never been more of a stranger to you than at that moment, for otherwise — otherwise you could never have done what you did a few minutes later. You kissed me, kissed me passionately again. I had to tidy my hair, which was disarranged, and as I stood looking in the mirror, looking at what it reflected — I thought I would sink to the ground in shame and horror — I saw you discreetly tucking a couple of banknotes of a high denomination in my muff. How I managed not to cry out I do not know, how I managed not to strike you in the face at that moment — you were paying me, who had loved you from childhood, paying me, the mother of your child, for that night! I was a prostitute from the Tabarin to you, nothing more — you had paid me, you had actually paid me! It was not enough for you to forget me, I had to be humiliated as well.

I reached hastily for my things. I wanted to get away, quickly. It hurt too much. I picked up my hat, which was lying on the desk beside the vase of white roses, my roses. Then an irresistible idea came powerfully to my mind: I would make one more attempt to remind you. "Won't you give me one of your white roses?"

"Happily," you said, taking it out of the vase at once.

"But perhaps they were given to you by a woman — a woman who loves you?" I said.

"Perhaps," you said. "I don't know. They were sent to me, and I don't know who sent them; that's why I like them so much."

I looked at you. "Or perhaps they are from a woman you have forgotten."

You seemed surprised. I looked at you hard. Recognize me, my look screamed, recognize me at last! But your eyes returned a friendly, innocent smile. You kissed me once more. But you did not recognize me.

I went quickly to the door, for I could feel tears rising to my eyes, and I did not want you to see them. In the hall — I had run out in such a hurry — I almost collided with your manservant Johann. Diffident and quick to oblige, he moved aside, opened the front door to let me out, and then in that one second — do you hear? — in that one second as I looked at the old man, my eyes streaming with tears, a light suddenly came into his gaze. In that one second — do you hear? — in that one second the old man, who had not seen me since my childhood, knew who I was. I could have knelt to him and kissed his hands in gratitude for his recognition. As it was, I just quickly snatched the banknotes with which you had scourged me out of my muff and gave them to him. He trembled and looked at me in shock — I think he may have guessed more about me at that moment than you did in all your life. All, all the other men had indulged me, had been kind to me — only you, only you forgot me, only you, only you failed to recognize me!

My child is dead, our child — now I have no one left in the world to love but you. But who are you to me, who are you who never, never recognizes me, who passes me by as if I were no more than a stretch of water, stumbling upon me as if I were a stone, you who always goes away, forever leaving me to wait? Once I thought that, volatile as you are, I could keep you in the shape of the child. But he was your child too: overnight he cruelly went away from me on a journey, he has forgotten me and will never come back. I am alone again, more alone than ever, I have nothing, nothing of yours — no child now, not a word, not a line, you have no memory of me, and if someone were to mention my name in front of you, you would hear it as a stranger's. Why should I not wish to die since I am dead to you, why not move on as you moved on from me? No, beloved, I do not blame you, I will not hurl lamentations at you and your cheerful way of life. Do not fear that I shall pester you any more — forgive me, just this once I had to cry out what is in my heart, in this hour when my child lies there dead and abandoned. Just this once I had to speak to you — then I will go back into

the darkness in silence again, as I have always been silent to you.

However, you will not hear my cries while I am still alive — only if I am dead will you receive this bequest from me, from one who loved you above all else and whom you never recognized, from one who always waited for you and whom you never summoned. Perhaps, perhaps you will summon me then, and I will fail to keep faith with you for the first time, because when I am dead I will not hear you. I leave you no picture and no sign, as you left me nothing; you will never recognize me, never. It was my fate in life, let it be my fate in death. I will not call for you in my last hour, I will leave and you will not know my name or my face. I die with an easy mind, since you will not feel it from afar. If my death were going to hurt you, I could not die.

I cannot write any more... my head feels so dulled... my limbs hurt, I am feverish. I think I shall have to lie down. Perhaps it will soon be over, perhaps fate has been kind to me for once, and I shall not have to see them take my child away... I cannot write any more. Goodbye, beloved, goodbye, and thank you... it was good as it was in spite of everything... I will thank you for that until my last breath. I am at ease: I have told you everything, and now you know — or no, you will only guess — how much I loved you, and you will not feel that love is any burden on you. You will not miss me — that consoles me. Nothing in your happy, delightful life will change — I am doing you no harm with my death, and that comforts me, my beloved.

But who... who will always send you white roses on your birthday now? The vase will be empty, the little breath of my life that blew around you once a year will die away as well! Beloved, listen, I beg you... it is the first and last thing I ask you... do it for me every year on your birthday, which is a day when people think of themselves — buy some roses and put them in that vase. Do it, beloved, in the same way as others have a Mass said once a year for someone now dead who was dear to them. I do not believe in God any more, however, and do not want a Mass — I believe only in you, I love only you, and I will live on only in you... oh, only for one day a year, very, very quietly, as I lived near you... I beg you, do that, beloved... it is the first thing that I have ever asked you to do, and the last... thank you... I love you, I love you... goodbye.

His shaking hands put the letter down. Then he thought for a long time. Some kind of confused memory emerged of a neighbour's child, of a young girl, of a woman in the dance café at night, but a vague and uncertain memory, like a stone seen shimmering and shapeless on the bed of a stream of flowing water. Shadows moved back and forth, but he could form no clear picture. He felt memories of emotion, yet did not really remember. It was as if he had dreamt of all these images, dreamt of them often and deeply, but they were only dreams.

Then his eye fell on the blue vase on the desk in front of him. It was empty, empty on his birthday for the first time in years. He shivered; he felt as if a door had suddenly and invisibly sprung open, and cold air from another world was streaming into his peaceful room. He sensed the presence of death, he sensed the presence of undying love: something broke open inside him, and he thought of the invisible woman, incorporeal and passionate, as one might think of distant music.

Stefan Zweig, 1922